

## Behind The Headlines COMMENTARY ON OUR TIMES

### Ethiopia, 1988

By **WERNER ERHARD**

**T**HE HEIGHT OF the traditional famine season in Ethiopia has come and gone. Yet in a year in which the devastation of drought and war have left millions without a harvest, there has been no mass starvation, no horror pictures like those which shocked the world in 1985. This year, thanks to an extraordinary cooperative effort of governments, private voluntary organizations and the Ethiopian people, there will be no famine.

For most people, the news of this remarkable accomplishment comes as a surprise. There have been reports of war, corruption, failure and occasional breakdowns in the relief operation. But little has been heard about the thousands of times the operation worked. The focus on isolated incidents rather than on the whole picture has dramatically distorted the public perception of the situation.

**IN THE ORDINARY COURSE** of events it is easy to assume that geopolitics and political ideology form a barrier to effective humanitarian assistance. Here, the United States, the U.S.S.R., Ethiopia and many others, working under the leadership of the United Nations, managed to pull together in spite of their very real differences, not merely to react to a widely publicized disaster as they have before, but to keep the disaster from happening in the first place.

Our images of the Ethiopian people also fail to reflect reality. We think about the people of Ethiopia in terms of the television pictures of 1985: pathetic, helpless victims, sitting on barren plain, waiting for rescue or death. We certainly don't see them as the key players in the relief effort — the people who carry the lion's share of the burden for the campaign to avert the famine. The women, children and men of Ethiopia — the people whose lives are at risk — are people whose courage, hard work and determination to stay on their land, to care for their families, to make it through the lean times, are virtually unknown to us.

**WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT** learning lessons from our failures, but equally important is the need to learn from our successes. Most of us cloak ourselves in a

sophisticated air of resignation called "hard realism" which does not allow us to see a future better than the present. What is happening this year in Ethiopia is something we can learn from — a demonstration that even in a situation perceived by many as hopeless, genuine accomplishment is possible.

Ethiopia's problems are by no means over. Its government is far from a model of openness and reform. It remains embroiled in two protracted civil wars. Even when harvests are good, Ethiopia faces substantial food deficits. It remains one of the poorest countries in the world, a place where the persistence of chronic hunger

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keeps people weak, productivity low, and vulnerability to famine high. And now it must also deal with a new tide of refugees from Sudan and Somalia coming into the country at a rate of nearly 2,000 per day.

**WHILE THE PICTURE IS** far from rosy, some promising developments are emerging:

- The lessons of the last year are being applied as governments and organizations gear up to meet the new refugee situation before it becomes a spectacle of death.

- The Ethiopian government is confronting the need to make the country "famine resistant," seeking support for a nationwide program of food banks, trans-

portation, rainfall and crop monitoring and labor-intensive projects to build irrigation systems and dams.

- Even more important in the long term, small but real first steps are being taken on the difficult road of agricultural and economic reform.

Nothing will really happen, however, unless there is a demand, and demand for action is generated when people can see both the need to intervene and the chance for a successful outcome. Governments now respond very effectively to famine, because pictures of starving children call forth massive support for quick action. Yet when it comes to development, to addressing the much more complex and frustrating problems of chronic hunger and poverty, they remain mired in the mud, with no sense that anything can be done to actually get things resolved.

When we realize what we have accomplished and are accomplishing, we begin to see new possibilities — new ways to get things done in situations we previously considered with a sense of helplessness, of resignation to the "hard realities." Even knowing that we do not have all the answers, we are stirred to act.

It is then that movement begins, that priorities get shifted and resources reallocated. It is then that our actions go beyond the mere ceremonial, the making of "politically correct" gestures and become forward motion toward real solutions. For people committed to ending the needless persistence of hunger worldwide, the remarkable accomplishment of averting the famine in Ethiopia in 1988 can bring that reality one step closer.

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